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REAGAN'S NEXT TERM

His Agenda, His Prospects

By William Safire

THE 50TH AMERICAN Presidential Inaugural" is the way it is being billed, but a few historians may remember the event next week as the first inauguration of a President of the United States to be held on a Super Bowl Sunday.

President-elect James Monroe, first to confront the issue of a swearing-in on the Christian Sabbath, followed the what's-the-rush advice of Chief Justice John Marshall; they waited until Monday, which left the nation without a President for

one day. A century and a half into our history, with war imminent, Woodrow Wilson broke the taboo and took the oath on Sunday. In 1957, Dwight D. Eisenhower also set aside the Monroe precedent; he followed Wilson in choosing a Sunday ceremony, but added a news-management wrinkle by barring the press from the first oath-taking and restaging it for the public the next day.

How has Ronald Wilson Reagan handled his Sunday-inaugural problem, which is compounded this time by competition with the nation's most riveting sports event? He has chosen Eisenhower's course, and will take the oath on Sunday in a "private" ceremony, followed by a media event 24 hours later. But the press is no longer as meek as it was in Eisenhower's day, and the Reagan White House does not want an unnecessary controversy rolling a call for unity.

Perhaps pool coverage will be permitted, with some picture-taking of the handshakes afterward, thus positioning Reagan between Wilson and Eisenhower, but the publicity lid will be pressed down to avoid detracting from the ceremony the next day.

This solution sends several signals for the next Reagan term:

■ Concern will be shown for piety, but religious observance is a distant second to the need to have

William Safire is a columnist for The New York Times.

a finger continuously on the button. Religion reigns in rhetoric, but national security rules the roost.

■ Tradition will be served, but it will be the specific tradition found to justify Reagan's course — he's all for Monroe's doctrines, but he likes Ike.

■ The press does not, in the President's mind, represent the public; he was the one elected to do that, and he is willing to let the media holler all they like — then he'll bend just a tad, enough to retain an image of amiability.

■ This President understands the personal priorities of most Americans — first to watch the game, then to watch his speech — and he is determined to get the Government to follow the majority's wishes.

Thus, Reagan will "stay in the pocket" on Inaugural and Super Bowl Sunday and will then provide a live instant replay of his oath-taking the next day, when the nation is ready to pay attention.

Those are a few symbolic clues to what to expect in the next four years. Another is provided by a senior Administration official (rarely does an anonymity-seeker, or a reporter, want to use the designation "junior official"), who says: "What you've seen is pretty much what you'll see." At 73, President Reagan — in his second Inaugural Address and his fourth State of the Union and Budget messages — is not about to seek a new direction that veers from his last term's "New Direction." He is likely to chart a second term that will be surprisingly unsurprising and ringingly Reaganesque — with a few mid-course corrections.

Will President Reagan, stern firer of the unruly Al Haig, true believer in official-family harmony, tolerate this sort of arm-wrestling on the Cabinet table throughout his second term?

He will serenely pretend, if the first term is a guide, to ignore the Weinberger-Shultz imbroglio and all the other blood feuds, dismissing them as a lot of newspaper talk. (They are blood feuds.)

White House chief of staff James A. Baker 3d wants to leave his present post, preferably for William Casey's job at the C.I.A. (they don't speak) or any good Cabinet post; if no opening appears, he's likely to be gone before

the end of the year to run for the governorship of Texas, after trying to arrange for a replacement at the White House like the efficient Drew Lewis, formerly Secretary of Transportation and now in private business.

EXCERPTED